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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that interviewers need to be aware of job requirements in order to make valid selection decisions. Such job information may be provided in several different formats. To determine if the type of job information influences decisions, management psychology students (N=48) received information about a job that stressed either the tasks involved or the basic abilities required. They then rated an applicant who was either technically average or superior, and who was either male or female. It was hypothesized that the task description would yield less accurate ratings and that the ability description would be discriminatory toward females. Contrary to the predictions, both types of descriptions produced decisions that were reflective of technical qualifications and neither discriminated against women. The ability oriented description yielded more lenient ratings on many scales, and participants felt more confident in their decisions when given this type of information. (Author/WAS)

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Job Description Format as a Factor in Employment Interviewer Decisions¹

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Abstract

Previous research had shown that interviewers need to be aware of job requirements in order to make valid selection decisions. Such job information may be provided in several different formats. To determine if the type of job information influenced decisions, 48 participants received information about a job that stressed either the tasks involved or the basic abilities required. They then rated an applicant who was either technically average or superior who was either male or female. It was hypothesized that the task description would yield less accurate ratings and that the ability description would be discriminatory towards females. Contrary to the predictions, both types of descriptions produced decisions that were reflective of technical qualifications and neither discriminated against females. The ability oriented description yielded more lenient ratings on many scales, and participants felt more confident in their decisions when given this type of information.

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Ostensibly the employment interview is an easy and quick way to select employees: the interviewer assesses the qualifications of the applicant, determines if these match the requirements of the job, and renders the appropriate decision. However, despite the popularity of interviews (Landy and Trumbo, 1976, estimate that over 90% of all companies use them) there is little evidence to support their effectiveness. Different interviewers seldom agree on their decisions (Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965) which accounts for the dismal validity of the interview in predicting job success (Carlson, 1972). In fact, decisions are often influenced by the applicant's sex (Rosen & Jerdee, 1974), age (Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975), race (Arvey, 1979), or physical attractiveness (Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981). The reason for such discrimination may be that interviewers often select people based on whether or not they match the interviewer's stereotype of the "ideal applicant" rather than on their ability to do the job (Rowe, 1963).

When job requirements are strongly emphasized, interviewers will consider them in their decisions (Carlson, 1972), discount irrelevant information, even if it's unfavorable (Siegfried, 1974), be able to agree with each other (Langdale & Weitz, 1973), and render accurate decisions (Siegfried, 1975) based mostly on job-relevant information (Wiener & Schneiderman, 1974). The use of job requirements to reduce sex discrimination has shown mixed results. Interviewers will still prefer male applicants (Heneman, 1977) and will attribute a male's performance to skill and a female's performance to luck

(Deaux & Emswiller, 1974). Interviewers will also raise their ratings of male applicants above comparable females when males are evaluated second (Siegfried & Pohlman, 1981). When job requirements are accompanied by a warning to not discriminate based on sex, male interviewers will rate very leniently (Siegfried, 1982). On the other hand, when raters are able to directly observe performance on a work sample they will rate in a non-discriminatory manner (Hamner, Kim, Baird, & Bigoness, 1974). Forcing interviewers to rate applicants on specific job requirements instead of general ability has increased accuracy (Osburn, Timmreck, & Bigby, 1981), although forcing interviewers to attend to general applicant qualifications has not (Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981).

Clearly the use of job requirements shows some promise as a way to reduce unwanted discrimination. The somewhat inconsistent results may be due to the differing ways in which job information was presented to the interviewers. Cornelius, Carron, and Collins (1979), and others, have outlined 3 major approaches to listing job analysis information: a task-oriented approach, where the job is broken into the tasks and duties; a worker-oriented approach, where general behaviors required on the job are given, (such as judging distances or reading directions); and an abilities-oriented approach where the underlying general abilities are listed, such as cognitive skills or physical proficiency. Because each of these methods stresses different viewpoints of the work, they are likely to have different effects on interviewers. The techniques produce different results when used by job analysts to cluster jobs (Cornelius, Carron, & Collins, 1979) or to develop testing procedures for selection (Levine, Ash, & Bennett, 1980). Levine, et al found the task-

oriented approach produced the most detailed testing plans and was most popular, although the worker-oriented approach was least costly. Cornelius, et al. suggested that the worker-oriented approach be used for setting salaries, the task-oriented approach for developing selection strategies, and the ability-oriented approach for establishing training needs.

It is likely that interviewing strategies based on each approach may yield differing results with varying degrees of sex discrimination. The task-oriented approach may lead to significantly less accurate ratings than the other two methods. This is primarily because when only tasks are given the interviewer must still exercise a great deal of judgment to determine if the applicant would be able to perform those tasks. With the other two techniques, the interviewer need only elicit information about the applicant's past performance or training to determine if the needed behaviors or abilities are present. The increased accuracy may come with a cost, however, in increased discrimination. The effectiveness of the worker-oriented and ability-oriented approaches in increasing accuracy results from reducing the amount of discretion and judgment left to the interviewer. Interviewers have been shown to react negatively when this discretion and freedom are curtailed. For example, a strong warning that decisions should not be based on applicant sex did insure that females and males were hired equally; however, the interviewers re-asserted their freedom by offering the females lower starting salaries (Rosen & Mericle, 1979). In yet another study, such warnings led to increased hiring of males (Siegfried, 1982). Therefore, because the interviewer has more freedom when only job duties are specified, the paradoxical hypothesis is that there will be less discrimination against females.

The purpose of the present investigation was to determine how the type of job information affected two things: the accuracy of interviewer judgments and the presence of sex discrimination. Two hypotheses were drawn from the literature reviewed: first, the use of a task-oriented approach would produce less accurate interviewer ratings; but second, the task-oriented approach would lead to less sex discrimination.

Method

Participants. The participants were 48 students enrolled in management psychology courses. All were familiar with the legal aspects of selection as well as the theoretical concepts of validity and utility. Two surveys were not able to be processed. The participants were 19 females and 26 males, 36 of whom were single. All except 2 had some previous work experience. Their average age was 23.8 years.

Materials. Standard one-page job resumes were prepared that listed various items of background information (i.e., age, home address, phone), previous work experience, grade point average, and personal interests. A picture appeared in the upper right-hand corner. These had been previously judged by college students as being "average" in attractiveness. Four different photographs were used for both males and females to control for any idiosyncratic reactions to a specific photograph, but differences in attractiveness among each set of 4 were non-significant. The male applicants were named "Paul" and the female applicants "Paula".

Two letters of recommendation were also included, one from a previous employer and one from a former professor. The first letter was used to manipulate the applicant's qualifications, as described below. The letter from the former

professor was the same in all cases, and described the social ability of the applicant based on class performance. All applicants were described as being very interpersonally adept.

Participants were then given a booklet that contained a set of information about the experimenter, how to receive more information, and a statement about their right to not participate in the experiment. This booklet also contained a description of the job and a series of rating scales.

Variables Manipulated. There were 3 manipulated variables: subject sex; type of job description; and applicant qualifications. Applicant qualifications were changed so that applicants were either highly qualified or moderately qualified for the job of training representative. This is done to see if interviewers could accurately perceive applicant qualifications to test hypothesis 1. The manipulation was done in the letters of recommendation by inserting the statement that the applicant ". . .is extremely well qualified to undertake the job. . .and performed at a superior level in our organization." The average qualification letter stated that the person ". . .has average qualifications. . .and performed at an average level." This manipulation is similar to that used in Siegfried, Cann, and Gilmore (1982), and has been shown to be effective.

The final variable manipulated was the method of presenting the job information. The task-oriented description was taken from the Dictionary of Occupation Titles for the job of Training Representative. This job was selected since it related to the previous experience the applicant had as a clerk in personnel records without being so identical that a snap judgment

could be made. It was also felt that such a position would be somewhat familiar to the participants. The task-oriented description was the paragraph from the DOT listing common duties of this job: ". . .prepares and conducts training programs. . .confers with management. . .formulates teaching outline. . . selects teaching aids. . .conducts general or specialized training sessions. . ."

The ability-oriented description was also drawn from the DOT by listing information pertaining to: 1) worker requirements (interest in communicating ideas; intellectual ability; analytic ability); 2) other (preference for public-contact work; experience in general personnel work); 3) training (background in personnel relations); 4) types of situations to which worker must adjust (frequent change; direction of others); 5) preferences (concerned with people, business contact); and 6) required aptitudes (intelligence, verbal ability, numerical ability, clerical perception).

The necessary information for a "worker-oriented" approach was not available for this job and this condition was therefore not investigated. This information is sold commercially but not readily obtainable.

Variables Measured. After reading all the information the raters completed fifteen 7-point scales including: hiring (ranging from definitely in favor, 7, to definitely opposed, 11); starting salary; expected performance; ability; and personality. These measures parallel those found effective in other studies (c.f. Siegfried, Cann, & Gilmore, 1982). To check on the effectiveness of the manipulations, one scale asked participants to rate the candidate's technical skills and a second asked them to rate the candidate's social skills. Participants were also asked to indicate their own technical skill level, how much they had been influenced by the applicant's technical

skill and social skill. They also indicated how similar they believed they were to the applicant. The final 4 scales dealt with the job information they had received. Participants were asked how confident they were that the applicant fit the job, how much they had relied on the job description, how much the description helped them decide if the applicant met minimum standards, and how much the description gave them a good overall picture of the job. Finally, participants indicated their age, marital status, sex, and work experience.

General Procedure. The participants were first given the survey book that began with a brief description of the research, the extent to which confidentiality would be maintained, and the identification of the experimenter and how to get in contact with him. The voluntary nature of the experiment was stressed. They were then told that they were to evaluate a resume of a candidate for a job as "part of a study on people's reactions to job candidates". Surveys were distributed at various class meetings and returned anonymously to the experimenter.

Results

Each of the 15 rating scales was subjected to a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results may best be understood by discussing them in the following groupings:

Manipulation checks. The participants all saw the applicants as highly socially skilled (Mean=6.00) with no significant differences due to experimental conditions. There was a significant difference ($F(1,37)=18.51, p<.001$) in perceived technical ability in the appropriate direction (Means=3.50 and 4.74).

However, there was also a significant effect on this scale for the type of job description ($F(1,37)=10.26$, $p<.01$). Those participants who received the task list ($M=3.68$) saw the applicant as less technically qualified than those who received the abilities description ($M=4.57$). This indicates that perceived technical competence was a function of both the information embedded in the letter of recommendation and the type of job information presented. All participants saw themselves as being technically skilled ($M=5.02$) with no differences among the conditions. Those who saw a technically skilled applicant ($M=4.48$) saw themselves as more similar to the applicant ($F(1,37)=11.36$, $p<.01$) than those who saw a lesser skilled applicant ($M=3.05$).

Criterion scales. The 5 major scales of interest (hiring, salary, ability, expected performance, and personality) showed various effects. The hiring scale appropriately showed a main effect for the applicant's technical skills ($F(1,38)=9.99$, $p<.01$), with the more skilled applicant more likely to be hired ($M=3.95$, 5.21). This scale also showed a significant effect for the type of job description ($F(1,38)=14.12$, $p<.001$), with those receiving the ability description more likely to hire than those receiving the task description ($M=5.33$, 3.82).

The same two effects were present when participants rated the applicant's ability: there was a main effect for technical skill ($F(1,38)=7.71$, $p<.01$) and job description ($F(1,38)=18.78$, $p<.001$). These again appeared when rating expected performance: ($F(1,38)=13.59$, $p<.001$) and ($F(1,38)=7.65$, $p<.01$). The pattern of means was the same as with the hiring decision.

Starting salary showed only an effect for technical qualification ($F(1,38)=12.99$, $p<.001$) with the technically competent being offered more

money ($M=2.32, 3.88$). The applicant's personality showed only an interaction between the type of job description and applicant sex ($F(1,38)=4.54, p<.05$). Male applicants were given higher ratings in the presence of the abilities description than any other condition.

Surprisingly, participants reported no significant differences in how much they had been influenced by the applicant's technical skills in the different conditions. However, they were significantly more influenced by social skills ($F(1,38)=10.55, p<.01$) in the presence of the ability-oriented description.

Job information. Participants were significantly more confident that the applicant fit the job when technical skills were high ($F(1,38)=15.60, p<.001$) and when the ability-oriented description was used ($F(1,38)=20.70, p<.001$). However, they believed that the task-oriented description gave them a better picture of the job ($F(1,38)=10.74, p<.01$). There were no significant differences in how much they relied on either description or how much the description helped them determine if the applicant met minimum standards.

Discussion

The results of this investigation supported neither hypothesis. The task-oriented description proved to be no less sensitive than the abilities-oriented description; sex discrimination was not less prevalent with the task-oriented description. Yet these findings are far from disappointing; the task-oriented approach was no less accurate because both descriptions yielded ratings that reflected technical competence. The task description did not lead to less discrimination simply because there was none to begin with.

Participants in this investigation relied greatly on technical competence in making their hiring, ability, salary, and expected performance ratings, regardless of the type of job description they received. This heavy reliance on technical ability and the appropriate disregard for the applicant's sex may have been due to several reasons. First, the participants were all well informed about equal employment opportunity regulations which may have kept them from exhibiting any prejudices they might have felt. Second, because they were also well versed in the theory of employee selection they may have recognized the importance of making valid decisions based on ability and technical competence. Third, the presence of any job description, regardless of its format, may have led to decisions based on job relevant information (c.f. Wiener & Schneiderman, 1974). Finally, the student participants may not have been representative of practicing decision makers, yet evidence presented by Bernstein, Hakel, and Harlan (1975) argues to the contrary.

An unexpected finding was the effect for the type of job description on almost all of the scales. Those who received the abilities-oriented description saw the applicant as more technically qualified, more able, more likely to perform and were thus more likely to hire them. Although both types of description helped participants determine if the applicant met minimum standards, they were more confident in their decisions when the ability-oriented description was used. Most likely the ability description conveyed more information about the person than the job-oriented description. The participants then received some information about the candidate which they could easily "match-up" with the information about the desired applicant. As

discussed above, this is an easier task than attempting to judge whether an applicant could perform a series of tasks. The ease of this task led to a confident decision. Although they felt they knew less about the job, participants probably felt they knew more about the person in this condition.

Perhaps the major implication, should these results be borne out in further testing in applied settings, is that both types of job descriptions will produce accurate, non-discriminatory decisions. However, the use of an ability-oriented description may result in more lenient ratings and decisions. Whether such leniency is justifiable in light of actual success on the job remains to be tested. Yet it is clear that interviewers will use job information to make decisions and that the form of that information may influence who they ultimately decide to hire.

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